



SEVEN STORIES OF  
**WINTER ART**

Juhani Lillberg

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# SEVEN STORIES OF WINTER ART

The world around sculpture events has changed over the decades. Since the beginning, the events have been very different, both in scale and content. During the years, some have thrived and others have died out. As for sculpturers, the second or maybe third generation is already on its way.

This publication contains a few stories which explain the origins and evolution of winter art events. The seven winter sites are Sapporo (Japan), Quebec City (Canada), Fairbanks (Alaska, USA), Valloire (France), Harbin (China), Moscow and Siberia (Russia) and Rovaniemi (Finland).

One could write a thousand different stories about winter art. In the northern regions, snow and ice provide good conditions for large scale festivals, sculpture art, snow hotels, winter games and many other kinds of hobby activities. The circumstances and operating environments determine the nature and volume of the event.

Further examples of large winter festivals could also have included the Ottawa Winterlude Festival in Canada or the Asahikawa Winter Festival in Japan. Of the annual snow and ice sculpture competitions, Breckenbridge (USA), Grindelwald (Switzerland), Tatra Mountains (Slovakia), San Candido/San Vigilio (Italy), Jalgava (Poland), Kiiruna (Sweden) and Nayoro (Japan) were also left unmentioned.

I think that snow and ice sculpture also deserves its own significant story as part of the cultural program of the Winter Olympics since it was featured for the first time in connection with the Winter Olympics in Calgary (Canada) in 1988.

Climate change has increased interest in winter art rather than hindered it, and new sculpture events or special projects are launched every year. Ice sculpture is also possible indoors, even in warmer regions. Over the years, many successful events have been discontinued or are organized on a non-regular basis as a consequence of financial factors.

As winter experiences and The North are rising trends in tourism, undoubtedly also winter art in various events has a good future.

Juhani Lillberg, Petäjävesi, Finland 2023

# SAPPORO, JAPAN

I visited the Sapporo Snow Festival for the first time in 1984. By this time, the festival had already grown from a small student event in the 1950s to one of international recognition, with more than two million attendees across the three event areas. Since its inception, the intention of the festival has been to create an event for people to enjoy the otherwise harsh and heavy nature of Hokkaido's snowy winters.

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Time passed and the world changed. More than ten years ago, the Makonamai (Japan Self-Defense Forces) festival area, where many of the largest snow structures had been, was closed. Eventually, the realizing of large snow structures in Odori Park also came to an end. The continuation of the international snow sculpture competition, which forms one part of the festival, has also been the subject of discussion over the years. Despite this uncertainty, the festival continues with hundreds of smaller sculptures, partly digitalized and with other new elements.

In addition to public funding, the festival has been sustained by sponsorship and sales activities in the area, allowing for free entry to visitors. A significant role has also been played by the Japanese Self-Defense Forces, who have built many of the festival's larger structures over the years. Due to rising

costs, sourcing sponsors for the competition is getting tougher and it is becoming more and more difficult to find organizers both in Japan and internationally. Whilst I recognize that catering and other sales activities within the festival area have become necessary in terms of funding, I feel that as snow and ice are still important selling points in the northern regions, it is important that these should remain as central elements to the festival. Snow structures and sculptures continue to be of interest and their implementation can be rationalized to reduce costs.

Sapporo was a founding member of the worldwide network of winter cities. The festival still has plenty of enthusiastic visitors from Japan, but by incorporating new attractions Sapporo can also maintain its role as one of the leading international winter cities. The event preceding the Sapporo Snow Festival has been the light event "White Illumination." Modern lighting technology enables increasingly more versatile light events during the dark season, and as the Sapporo Snow Festival has shown for years, light and snow belong together.

*In 2019, Helsinki Cathedral celebrated the long cooperation between Finland and Japan in Odori Park.*





In the tourism industry, investments come back many times over in the form of various multiplier effects. In recent years, Sapporo has invested heavily in international air traffic and its air terminal. For me and other Finns, it was unfortunate that the Covid pandemic brought an end to Finnair's direct flights from Helsinki to Sapporo in December of 2020.

I was however fortunate to have seen the Helsinki Cathedral when it was realized from snow as a centennial project of diplomatic relations between Finland and Japan before the public snow building events ended in Odori Park in 2019. It was in fact the case that an ice sculpture of the Cathedral had already been made in Sapporo in a smaller scale in 1972.

Over the years numerous other public buildings from around the world have been recreated in snow or ice which has contributed to making the Sapporo Snow Festival a festival of international culture. As a result, the people of Sapporo have been able to enjoy the opportunity to catch glimpses of different parts of the world without the need to leave their home city. The festival's snow and ice sculpture competitions featuring international contenders have also been organized towards a similar intention.

The residents of Sapporo have been able to see many public buildings from around the world in their hometown, such as Fontana di Trevi and Palazzo Poli in Rome.

*In the tourism industry, investments come back many times over in the form of various multiplier effects.*



Hundreds of small sculptures made by the townspeople are an integral part of the Sapporo Snow Festival.



# QUEBEC CITY, CANADA

Carnaval de Québec, Quebec's winter carnival in Canada is one of the oldest and most famous winter events, comparable with Sapporo. The history of the festival dates back to 1894, but came to resemble its current form in the 1950s during the Cold War, when the festival offered an opportunity for more open international discussions and meetings under the guise of a winter art event. Since then, the festival has continued without interruption as a versatile cultural and outdoor event.

Every year, the centerpiece has been a large ice or snow castle surrounded by an international snow sculpture competition. In 2019 the concept of the festival was renewed, and through increased cooperation with local entities and event organizers it became much more widespread throughout the city than in previous years.

*Today, the Québec Winter Carnival is undeniably a major winter event and continues to be a driving force in Quebec's winter life.*

*The festival must have its own mascot, in Quebec it is Bonhomme.*







*For a long time, the centerpiece of outdoor events at the Quebec Carnival was a large-scale snowcastle.*

I participated in the Quebec International Snow Sculpture Competition three times during the 1980s. The artistic variety of the sculptures has always been wide due to the international nature of the competition. Whilst organization of the competition itself stopped a few years ago, snow and ice sculpting continued as smaller separate projects in different parts of the city. When the concept of the event was renewed, the festival became more focused on fun and entertainment, including newer elements such as the virtual presence of the event. Quebec's central role in the international snow sculpture field was partly emphasized by establishing the International Association of Snow and Ice Sculpture (Association Internationale de Sculpture sur Neige et Glace) in Quebec in 1986.





*One of the annual teams of the Quebec sculpture competition was an Inuit group. Photo from 1988.*

*The winning work of the 1987 snow sculpture competition "Le Depart" by Upi Kärri, Juhani Lillberg, Pentti Aho.*



# FAIRBANKS, ALASKA

Fairbanks is an ideal place for ice sculpting. The international ice sculpture competition "World Ice Art Championships" was begun by volunteers in the city in 1990. The event, organized by the IceAlaska association, has since diversified into a sculpture park with several competitions. Each year there are still close to 300 event volunteers and 100 carvers in three international competitions. The organizers assure that the ice intended for carving is so clear and clean that you can read a newspaper through the meter-thick ice. In the evenings the sculptures are illuminated with colored lights, and in combination with the naturally occurring auroras, there is a special atmosphere to the area almost every night.



*The reputation of the IceAlaska sculpture competition is based on a unique sculpture material, clear, natural ice.*

Although sometimes only virtually, I have been able to follow the World Ice Art Championships event as an expert and judge from the beginning. Along the way there have been many different organizers, and the idea of including a new event area has also been considered. In 2019, the entire main building of the event with its equipment was destroyed in a fire. Following a one year break, the event continued and expanded to include snow sculpting. The level of the competition has always been high, in part due to good sculpting conditions, and also because the tools for ice sculpting have been continually developed and refined. North America offers a wide range of power carving tools and training facilities. Education and the examples set by the sculptors have also been an inspiration for the continuous growth of ice and snow sculpting as a hobby in this part of the world.

One of the main challenges of IceAlaska, like all other sculpture events, is how to develop ice sculpture in terms of content. In the Fairbanks competitions, the diversification of sculptures is helped by the fact that the competitions have separate categories for abstract and representational sculptures. I have thought about what else could be done to increase this variety, such as promoting interdisciplinarity or combining untried materials. With its openness, I believe that Fairbanks would provide good opportunities for such experimentation. Another challenge in Fairbanks is its small surrounding population and long distance from larger cities. Fortunately, winter experiences and The North are rising trends in tourism, so IceAlaska undoubtedly has a good future.



One of the most amazing ice sculptures was that of Japanese Junichi Nakamura's work group in the Multiblock competition in 2012.

High quality ice makes great sculptures. Ice fish by Alexander Partenov and Mikhail Vasilenko in 2013.



# VALLOIRE, FRANCE

The skiing centre of Valloire de Galibier is an ideally sized town for an artistic winter event, located in Savoie on the French-Italian border. I participated in Valloire's first international snow sculpture competition with the sculptor Upi Kärri in 1984 and again a couple of times after.

In later years, I have occasionally judged the competitions, and on behalf of the International Snow and Ice Sculpting Association, I was involved when the snow and ice sculpting competitions of the Albertville Winter Olympics of 1992 were organized in Valloire and the neighboring village of Verneys. One of my latest Valloire art experiences was participating in an international hay and straw sculpture competition with sculptor Nina Heikkonen in 2015.

Competitions in Valloire are popular among international artists because of their artistic freedom and the human-sized milieu. Along with international competitions, several similar national competitions are organized in the region. Whilst changes in the city's management have led to discussions relating to the continuation of the events over the years, the organizers of the competition have been able to justify its importance for encouraging local tourism. I am sure we will continue to see snow and ice sculptures along the city's main streets for many winters to come.

*Snow also bends into fine structures, as in the work of Bernard Herquel and Pierre Bernard in Valloire's first snow sculpture competition in 1984.*





*Snow sculpture has also been involved in the cultural program of the Winter Olympics. Image sculpture from Albertville Olympics in 1992. Sculpture by Swedish Ricky Sandberg and Dan Lestander.*

# HARBIN, CHINA

The Harbin Ice Festival began in 1985 in the city center's Zhaolin Park. Since then, it has expanded to include the further two areas of the beautiful Sun Island park, and the Ice and Snow World which is reserved separately for the festival. During the months of January and February, there are also ice sculptures along Harbin's Main street and around the city, becoming the host of the largest event of its kind in the world. In 2019, the organizers announced that a total of 23.37 million visitors had attended the festival.

*Ice and Snow World is an icy city and fantasy world covering dozens of hectares which has become increasingly significant for tourism and the city of Harbin's image.*



My first visit to Zhaolin Park in 1989 as a spectator was a memorable experience. I had never seen such a number of ice structures and sculptures before. In the following years I returned many times to work with the ice lifted from the Songhua River as a competitor. In the 2000s, I became a judge for the festival's snow and ice competitions almost every year and was also involved in its general development. The festival's huge ice and snow structures are almost incomprehensible. Ice and Snow World is an icy city and fantasy world covering dozens of hectares which has become increasingly significant for tourism and the city of Harbin's image.

The development of the event has also been linked to technical developments within the field. Whilst there is an adequate workforce available in China, moving the huge ice masses is challenging and requires special knowledge and equipment. The development of lighting has also been particularly significant for the event. In the early 90s, electricity in the city could still rely on open wire networks.

Today, hundreds of thousands of modern, computer-controlled colored lights are embedded in the structures and sculptures of the festival area, creating a fairy-tale like atmosphere in the evenings. One could ask whether all this is necessary? In my opinion, yes, it is. As in Sapporo and Quebec, I believe that the cold, long and dark winters should be enjoyed.

*Fairy-tale like atmosphere in the festival area.*





*A large snow structure requires precise plans and many sculptors in order to be successfully realized.*

Snow and ice construction also has a lot to offer from a technical point of view. In cooperation with the Dutch University of Eindhoven, the Harbin University of Technology has realized projects using ice to test different kinds of shapes and new material applications. This has included experiments with cellulose reinforced ice, created by mixing sawdust with water and snow and freezing the combination into a mold to create a desired form.

The University of Eindhoven began the project by making experiments at the municipality of Juua in Eastern Finland, though owing to more reliable weather conditions, Harbin was later chosen as the location for the tests. The project has resulted in the possibility to produce ice structures and indoor spaces for the festival areas in Harbin which are structurally much safer than before.

*In 2018, "Flamenco," a hollow hardened ice structure that entered the Guinness Book of Records, rising to a height of more than 30 meters. The technical universities of Eindhoven (Netherlands) and Harbin were responsible for its implementation.*



*New ice construction techniques enable new types of hollow, yet durable ice structures.*



*The Harbin Winter Festival is an entire ice city with numerous events.*

Many other cities, even in the same province of Heilongjiang, are also determined to develop their own winter events. In Harbin, as in many other places, different ways of organizing the event have been tried. The festival was originally organized by public entities, but now the main parts of the event have become commercialized. Time will tell how the technical production, marketing, accessibility, etc. of the events can be maintained in different implementation methods.



*The Songhua River flowing through the city of Harbin provides not only the material for the festival, but also space for winter walks.*

# MOSCOW AND SIBERIA, RUSSIA

In Russia, ice sculpting is becoming more common as an indoor event in. Artificial, factory-made ice is used to make ice bars and sculpture exhibitions, as well as indoor playgrounds. At the same time, authentic environments for winter art and events can still be found in the northern regions.

Numerous ice and snow sculpture competitions and other related events are organized in Siberia on an annual basis. Events in Yakutia, Perm, Krasnoyarsk and Khabarovsk are entered into the international calendar every year. There have also been various competitions in Moscow, St. Petersburg and Yekaterinburg.

In 2014, an ice sculpture competition was organized at the Sochi Winter Olympics, with the preceding qualifying competitions held in Moscow, Vyborg and Murmansk. Moscow's Red Square has probably become recognized as one of the most famous places for ice sculpture events. Other various forms of competitions have also been tested. One such example was a triathlon competition in St. Petersburg, where the same sculptors competed by making sculptures from snow, ice and sand.

There are plenty of skilled ice carvers in Russia. For artists visiting from abroad, the aforementioned competition venues offer an interesting environment where culture and expertise are valued. In Yakutia, winter carving events begin in late November and early December, when temperatures drop to around -40 degrees Celsius. Although the ice is hard and work is challenging in these conditions, the competition is held here every year and is certain to continue.



*Light belongs to winter and creates its own atmosphere at winter events. In Yakutia, carving is also possible in the permafrost tunnel.*





*Ice sculptures and winter events taking place at Moscow's Red Square.*

The international winter event is also very important for Perm and Krasnoyarsk, as the cities strive to transform from unknown closed factory towns into cultural cities. It is important for all Siberian cities to show that there is life and know-how outside of Moscow too.

Despite international political and military disputes, I hope they will continue their events into the future, and that it is possible for a large number of foreign participants to attend. The realization of such events can be dependent on financial resources and travel opportunities, and art events serve as one of the best forms of international cooperation and opportunities for cultural exchanges.



# ROVANIEMI, FINLAND

Snow sculpting began in Finland at the beginning of the 1980s as playful competitions organized by Suomen Latu Ry, when the sculptures also had to be suitable for a children's playground. It was a good idea in itself, but it drove Finnish artists away from snow sculpture for a long time.

*Rovaniemi's international snow sculpture competitions in the 1980s were responsible for boosting tourism in the region, leading to the many snow hotels and other winter tourist attractions in Lapland today.*

Artistic snow sculpting first started in Rovaniemi in 1985 when the association Lapin Veistotaiteen Yhdistys organized the first international snow sculpting competition. Later, the event expanded to include small-scale ice sculpting and youth competitions, becoming an annual sculpting venue popular among international sculptors. Sadly, the activity ceased in 1996 when the responsibility for organizing the event was transferred to the city's art museum and other local actors. Organizing international events requires good networks and a lot of volunteer work, which is a difficult combination for a municipal organization.

*A snow sculpture "Aiming for heights" by the Canadian team, Pierre Tessier and Susan Ricard, in Rovaniemi.*





*A snow sculpture depicting the growth of the artist couple Teeuwen in Rovaniemi.*



On a more positive note, the Rovaniemi competitions and information gained from other events served to provide a model for the now popular snow hotels and other winter tourism developments in Lapland. The faculty of arts at the University of Lapland also adopted the idea of snow sculpting into teaching, and as a result the use of snow in art education has been integrated into local curriculums. I am hopeful that in the future this method of teaching will become more widely adopted and that students will have the opportunity to learn through this practice throughout all of Finland.

At the beginning of the millennium, the idea of a spectacular snow and ice project was brought to Rovaniemi by American gallerist Lance Fung. The million-dollar project SnowShow was launched with twenty large winter art projects being implemented in Rovaniemi and Kemi. The works were designed by internationally renowned artists

and architects in partnership with a local entrepreneur who was responsible for the implementation of the project. Whilst the event was a great success and received a lot of publicity, it lacked in continuity, and when the budget failed local builders were left without payments. SnowShow served as a lesson that without a sufficient implementation plan, a good idea alone is not enough.

Having understood the situation in Rovaniemi, we can perhaps return to the texts of the preface. The Rovaniemi International Snow Sculpture Competition has come to an end, but a lot has happened in Lapland and Rovaniemi since. Everything has its time and events follow one another. A small beginning like the six dirty snow sculptures made by students in Sapporo in the 1950s can lead to a big event. Today's wonderful snow and ice sculpture exhibits include snow hotel reliefs and other decorations. Due to growing winter tourism in Lapland and favorable external conditions the return of a significant artistic winter event would be a welcome addition to the region.



*Snow sculpture in Rovaniemi and Kemi culminated in 2004 in the SnowShow art and architecture project. Authors of the sculptures: Yoko Ono and Arata Isozaki (current page), Tatsuo Miyajima and Tadao Ando (left).*



# AUTHOR JUHANI LILLBERG

Juhani Lillberg (born 12 May 1943) is an innovator and a civil servant, but also an internationally acclaimed artist. As an artist, he has received numerous awards in wood, snow/ice and hay sculpture competitions. His team won the first Olympic snow sculpture competition at the 1988 Calgary Olympics. As President of the International Snow and Ice Sculpture Association, he has since judged all the sculpture events of the Winter Olympics and more than a hundred other international sculpture competitions.

Juhani Lillberg is a founding member of the University of Lapland and the Arctic Center in Rovaniemi. Ever since the opening of the university, his career there continued for thirty years as the administrative director. He has received numerous national and international recognition awards. In 2003, he was awarded a Finnish honorary title of Kanslianeuvos by the President of the Republic of Finland. As an active speaker and author, his topics have included winter art, development of tourism, culture and the Olympics.

*In the northern regions, snow and ice provide good conditions for large scale festivals, sculpture art, snow hotels, winter games and many other kinds of hobby activities.*



*Juhani Lillberg carving ice in Harbin in the 80s.*



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